

MY BODY IS NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN LAND  
ON: INDIGENOUS FEMINISMS IN ERIKA T.  
WURTH'S PROSE

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*For the womxn who came before me  
and all the womxn who will come after*

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INDIGENOUS FEMINISMS IN ERIKA T. WURTH'S PROSE

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Abstract: In their book *Introduction to Feminist Thought and Action*, Menoukha Robin Case and Allison V. Craig define Indigenous Feminism as centered around “cultural preservation and Indigenous sovereignty” (61). Specifically, Case and Craig explain, “Indigenous Feminism is about fighting the ongoing effects of colonization” (61). The following thesis looks at two of Erika T. Wurth’s texts (*Buckskin Cocaine* and *You Who Enter Here*) as representations of how Indigenous Feminisms are depicted in and enacted through literature. Both *Buckskin Cocaine* and *You Who Enter Here* tell stories about what it means to be an Indigenous person—or, more specifically, Indigenous womxn, in the settler-colonial society that exists in the United States and has been internalized within Native communities. As such, the following thesis explores what is to be gained from telling stories that simultaneously refuse to ignore the internalized heteropatriarchy in these spaces and address the paths forward to (re)Indigenizing these spaces. In the first chapter I provide a combination of a literature review focusing on Indigenous Feminisms and an analysis of the characters of Candy Francois and Lucy Bigboca in *Buckskin Cocaine*. I focus in on representation and the complicated politics of representation and performance. In the second chapter I focus on *You Who Enter Here*, looking primarily at the characters of Maria, Matthew, and Chris to talk about the effects of internalized heteropatriarchal models on young Native communities. I explore how the gang life genre is (re)conceptualized through Wurth’s understanding of what current possibilities are provided for Native youths in general. Overall, my thesis hopes to serve as an entryway into my own thinking about how Indigenous Feminisms are presented in literary texts.

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## PREFACE

I went to Albuquerque with a plan.

I had read Susan Power's (Standing Rock Sioux) *Roofwalker* and hoped to interrogate the ways urban Native stories refuse stereotypical notions of identity and belonging. Specifically, I posited that Susan Power's work recreates the notion of home in opposition to both the stereotypical image of the American Dream and the colonialist-imposed image of the reservation, and the NCAIS (Newberry Consortium of American Indian Studies) Spring Workshop in 2019 seemed the perfect opportunity to expand my knowledge in preparation of writing a thesis centered around these interests. The theme of the workshop—"Indigenous Borderlands"—would allow me to examine how the imposed borders of reservations are significant in determining what 'home' means within Susan Power's work. Furthermore, the imaginary borders of Indigenous identities are significant in interrogating how Susan Power's characters (and Susan Power herself) view themselves and others around them. I entered the workshop knowing that my own participation in Indigenous studies was a form of borderland work, as I felt a responsibility as a white, settler scholar to constantly cross and re-cross the borders of my own identity in order to (re)conceptualize my relationship with my scholarly and activist pursuits.

However, as is often the case in interdisciplinary settings where creative and radical thinking is encouraged, I left with an entirely different thesis than the one I had planned.



NCAIS's 2019 Spring Workshop took place during the spring break of the 2019 spring semester, during which I was taking my first graduate-level literature course that focused on Native literature alongside an independent study course about urban Native history. The simultaneous viewing of contemporary (post-2017) Native literature and histories of relocation (forced, coerced, and voluntary) was more than enlightening. It brought up questions about geographies of both time and place, and through the disciplines of literature and history, I began to find my place in the academic conversation. Reading Erika T. Wurth's *Buckskin Cocaine*, Tommy Orange's *There There*, and Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heartberries* alongside Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), Philip J. Deloria (Dakota descent), Coll Thrush, and Kent Blansett (Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Shawnee, and Potawatomi) heightened my curiosity about how Native stories of the present are told and why they are told the way they are, particularly when these stories are told by Native womxn, which, in the case of Tommy Orange is done through the first-person narration of his female-identifying characters.

The "Indigenous Borderlands" workshop, then, came at an opportune time in my studies. Just as Wurth's newest novel, *You Who Enter Here*, had captured my attention, I was in a room of young, primarily womxn scholars who encouraged my interest and questions.

A quick look over my notes from this workshop reveals the questions I was asking myself and others during the three-day event: Where do we find Indigenous borderlands? Who talks about Indigenous borders and who writes about them? What is made visible when we talk about borders in Native spaces? These questions overwhelmed me, and the conversations I had with the other participants at dinner, over drinks, and

throughout almost every minute of the workshop circled around the possible answers. But my overarching question combined my current interests. It allowed literature to be both the mirror through which we recognize the world and catalyst of change in which we present potential futures, and it explored what paths to change existed in spite of a lack of institutional and legal support. My question, then, became more focused through my conversations at the “Indigenous Borderlands” workshop: If, in this settler nation, there is no space in the legal framework for Indigenous sovereignty, what other spaces do Indigenous activists create for themselves in which change can and does occur, and, more importantly, how and why are Indigenous womxn at the forefront of the creation of these spaces?

This is where Erika T. Wurth came in.

The thesis that follows is not the thesis I set out to write, but it is the thesis I believe needed to be written. I argue that reading *Buckskin Cocaine* and *You Who Enter Here* as “realistic” fiction is only part of the story. While holding up a mirror to the ugly truths of life for Native peoples in the film industry (*Buckskin Cocaine*) or the gangs of Albuquerque (*You Who Enter Here*), Wurth also presents possibilities beyond these current realities. Wurth does, in fact, write “a dark and sometimes satiric – but more natural version of Native life,” with the idea of providing a way “for Natives to look at that darkness and have something to process it with.”<sup>1</sup> However, she also refuses notions of Native erasure, letting her characters be fully in the present and purposefully not writing to please white readers:

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<sup>1</sup> Erika T. Wurth, “An Interview with Erika T. Wurth,” interview by Michael Noll, *Read to Write Stories*, September 28, 2017, <https://readtowritestories.com/2017/09/28/an-interview-with-erika-t-wurth/>.

I want to write about my tribe in the same way Salinger did about his. Or Richard Wright about his. I want my work to be, and I'm using these words a lot but, an organic and imaginative expression of what I'm interested in and the world that I know. So I think that it seems resistant only because so many native writers are celebrated for centering whiteness by either doing a version of Indian that's very palatable (defined by their sadness because of whatever experiences they have with racism) or by constantly talking about racism in an overt way, which just centers white people again—it doesn't allow me the artistic space to write what I want to write about.<sup>2</sup>

As such, Wurth presents not only potential futures but also potential presents for both the fictional and physical communities with which she aligns.

My thesis begins here, with a commitment to understanding that this story (the one of Erika T. Wurth and how her work relates to Indigenous Feminism) is one of many interpretations of Native presents and futures. My work does not by any means wish to prioritize one possible present/future over the other potentialities—whether they be positive or negative or somewhere in between. Rather, I write this thesis as one of many, adding my voice to a long list of current scholars and activists who promote decolonial and anti-colonial paths forward.

My thesis began and will end with questions, one of which was written in the margins of a seminar paper (which later became one of my thesis chapters) by Dr. Doug Miller: “What is at stake when the stories we tell about contemporary Native peoples are stories of violence and death?”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

My M.A. thesis, “My Body is Not Something You Can Land On: Indigenous Feminisms in Erika T. Wurth’s Prose,” does not outright answer Miller’s question; however, by slightly reframing the question itself, I do suggest and interrogate potential answers. I approached my thesis, then, with this reframed question in mind. Rather than asking what is at stake when contemporary Indigenous literature depicts violence and death, I ask what would be at stake if young and emerging Native writers did not.

My answer came to me while reading *You Who Enter Here*: the truth. Reality. Everyday lived experiences. And the possible futures that come out of these experiences.

## INTRODUCTION

### MY BODY IS NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN LAND ON

#### *Hashtag (White) Feminism*

At the beginning of 2019, two hashtags were featured in my Instagram bio:

#intersectionalfeminism and #empoweredwomenempowerwomen.<sup>3</sup> Below these hashtags

I had placed a link to my most recent publication, and below this link I had archived old

Insta-stories with categories such as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Womxn and

Girls, the recent Abortion bans, and time lapses of me writing this thesis.<sup>4</sup> Then comes

the most important aspect of the profile—my photos: a mixture of selfies, group shots,

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<sup>3</sup> Courtney Whited (@creatingclw), *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/creatingclw>.

<sup>4</sup> The terms “women” and “womxn” are used throughout my thesis, sometimes in seemingly interchangeable ways. I will primarily use the term “womxn” to describe an inclusive group of female-identifying individuals in hopes of decentering the cisgender, white woman as the often understood norm, which promotes a false binary meant to uphold the settler-capitalist nation at the expense of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals. Specifically, “womxn” serves as a way for me to acknowledge that the term “woman” is often denied to many female-identifying BIPOC in order to dehumanize them and refuse them citizenship. On the other hand, the terms “women” and “woman” will also be utilized to point to groups of or individual female-identifying peoples who are either cisgender or have indicated in their writing and work that they prefer to be identified as such. “Women” will also be used to discuss notions of “womanhood” as a well-regulated category. I recognize that none of these terms are without their flaws, and I hope that my continuing struggle with the terminology not only serves as a form of resistance against the language at my disposal but also indicates the inherent failure of binaries. See Breena Kerr, “What do Womxn Want?,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/style/womxn.html>; Crystal Paradis, “A note on inclusive language: intersectionality, feminism, womxn, cis, nonbinary, etc.,” *Feminist Oasis*, January 2, 2018, <https://feministoasis.com/inclusive-language-womxn-cis-nonbinary/>; and Womyn’s Centre, “Why the Y?,” *Womyn’s Center*, accessed November 3, 2019, <https://womynscentre.wordpress.com/why-the-y/>.

and aesthetic images. The two hashtags in my bio mean a lot to me, and I take the concepts they espouse seriously. They were featured on my profile because I believe them to be integral to my identity. However, the fact that I attach meaning to these hashtags and identify with them is problematic. I am a cisgender white woman who, for the most part, adheres to patriarchal beauty standards. As such, these hashtags become more accessible to me, and I am less likely to be punished for incorporating these hashtags into my profile. For this reason, my incorporation of the hashtags must be interrogated and called out. However, it is hard to interrogate these terms deeply in a character-limited bio on Instagram. But, more than that, most people—including myself—don't even try. When I had them featured, I did not explain why these hashtags were on my account, and there is no clear connection between these terms and the pictures featured below. In other words, I worry, rightly so, that my using the term intersectional is doing more harm than good.

#intersectionalfeminism and #empoweredwomenempowerwomen are, at their center, about two main concepts: intersectionality and solidarity, but, as writer and sex educator Cameron Glover makes clear, these two concepts were not made for me—a college-educated cisgender white woman.<sup>5</sup> Rather, intersectionality is another in a long list of terms created by and for Black womxn and Womxn of Color that has been and continues to be appropriated by white women:

Let me be perfectly clear: **intersectionality has never been, nor will it ever be, for white women.** Why? Because white women have never carried the weight of having to choose between their race or their gender when both mark them a visible target for oppression.

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<sup>5</sup> Cameron Glover, "Intersectionality Ain't for White Women," *Wear Your Voice*, Aug. 25, 2017. <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/identities/feminism/intersectionality-aint-white-women>.

White women have never had to become the mules of their own movements, both hypervisible and invisible to their own people. White women are not discounted, disregarded, and devalued in the ways that Black women and femmes are. In fact, white womanhood is positioned so far on the pedestal of ideal womanhood that it's become a weapon for upholding white supremacy.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, intersectionality was/is a theory defined by its centralization of Womxn of Color, and when white feminists use the term, we—white feminists—risk erasing those voices and (re)centering our own privileged voices despite our intentions. But does this mean that white women should not or cannot practice and enact intersectional feminism?

Of course not.

What it does mean, however, is that there is a difference between a white feminist and *white feminism*.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of online activism and ally-ship (or the lack thereof), the confusion surrounding what it means to say you are a feminist seems more complicated than ever, and the consequences of this ambivalence is the continued replication of a false white default. The purpose of *white feminism*, then, is to create space for the advancement of other white women, which is done through the deliberate and active continuation of white supremacy to uphold the settler-capitalist state at the

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<sup>6</sup> Glover, <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/identities/feminism/intersectionality-aint-white-women>. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> When *white feminism* is italicized in this text I am discussing a feminism that, consciously or unconsciously, upholds notions of white supremacy and settler colonialism in order to advocate for white women at the expense of BIPOC womxn. It should be noted that white feminists do not necessary have to participate in white feminism, and, as such, I will be making distinctions throughout my thesis between white feminists who attempt to dedicate themselves to the de- and anti-colonial work found in Indigenous Feminist frameworks and white feminism, which is populated by white women who claim feminism but do so in exclusionary and harmful ways. The italics should help readers distinguish these concepts.

expense of Indigenous womxn and Womxn of Color.<sup>8</sup> Not only did many white women, several whom claim to be feminists, vote for Trump in the 2016 election, but also some white feminist groups have reconciled their feminism with their equally fervent white supremacy.<sup>9</sup> Both of these facts point to a disconnect between the ideal of feminism as being for **all women** and the reality of feminism as a broad category that includes within it unapologetic white supremacists, which a dangerous reality for all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of color. However, white feminism is dangerous even when not at its most extreme.

Erasure, both metaphorical and literal, is key to settler colonialism, and *white feminism* often adopts and perpetuates the settler colonial goal of erasure in order to raise white women to the level of white men. Lisa Kahaleole Hall (Kanakanaka Maoli) points to the various types of Indigenous erasure in her article “Strategies of Erasure: U.S. Colonialism

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<sup>8</sup> For the most part I will identify authors, scholars, and characters using their specific Nations. That being said, at times I discuss Indigenous or Native Nations and communities more broadly and therefore will be using the aforementioned terms. I will use “Indigenous” to refer to Indigenous movements that transcend the imposed settler borders worldwide. “Indigenous” will also refer to Indigenous activism that addresses the global effects of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples of all spaces. “Native,” on the other hand, will be used to discuss Native peoples from the settler nation that is called the United States and, in some cases, the Canada and Mexico, in order to provide a more specific commentary about the specific effects of settler colonialism on North America and the people (Native and settler) that inhabit this space. Furthermore, some characters in Wurth’s prose are not identified as being from specific Nations but are more broadly claiming Indigeneity, and, for this reason, these characters will simply be identified as “Native.” “American Indian” and “Indian” will only be used in reference to other programs that adopt these terms or when quoting others who use these terms as part of their identity. There will also be references the creation of the term “Indian” and “Indianness” in the settler imagination. As should be clear, my use of these terms remains problematic, as I speak (solely) the settler-used and imposed language that is English, which itself is structured to maintain binaries in order to uphold settler colonialism.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Elizabeth Cargle, “When Feminism is White Supremacy in Heels,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, Aug. 16, 2018. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/politics/a22717725/what-is-toxic-white-feminism/>; Jessie Daniels, “The Trouble with White Feminism: Whiteness, Digital Feminism and Intersectional Internet,” in *Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (Peter Lang Digital Editions series, 2016), 8-9.



and Native Hawaiian Feminism.”<sup>10</sup> Positioning Indigenous Feminism as an answer to how we can “combat erasure,” Hall explains, “Because colonization relies on forced forgetting and erasure, the need to bring the past forward into our consciousness is ongoing. Reconstructing tradition and memory is a vital element of indigenous survival, and there is nothing simple or one-dimensional about the process of reconstruction.”<sup>11</sup> Violence, then, is not confined to physical violence, as we know from important conversations about the various means through which settler governments enact genocide, and in recent years activists working to bring awareness to Indigenous rights and sovereignty have pushed back on this erasure, demanding that settlers understand not only the history of genocidal violence but also its continuance into the present.<sup>12</sup> Despite the growing awareness, however, forces of erasure continue, even and especially within *white feminist* movements.

It should be noted that white feminists are able to (and should) actively decide not to participate in *white feminism*. In fact, I argue that white feminists must loudly and actively denounce *white feminism* as another racist institution based upon notions of white supremacy and work to dismantle this system as BIPOC womxn have for centuries if they truly wish to participate in de- and anti-colonial movements. The fact that a number of white feminists do not do so has perpetuated the gap between white-run feminist movements and Indigenous-led activism. Laura Tohe (Diné) provides one reason

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<sup>10</sup> Lisa Kahaleole Hall, “Strategies of Erasure: U.S. Colonialism and Native Hawaiian Feminism,” *American Quarterly* 60 (2), June 2008, p. 273-280.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, 279.

<sup>12</sup> For more information see Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warrens, eds., *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018; Tony Barta, “Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 6 (2): 180-183; Lindsey Kingston, “The Destruction of Identity: Cultural Genocide and Indigenous Peoples,” *Journal of Human Rights* 14 (1): 63-83; and more.

for the rejection of feminism in Native communities in her seminal text “There is No Word for Feminism in My Language”: “There was no need for feminism because of our matrilineal culture. And it continues. For Diné women, there is no word for feminism.”<sup>13</sup> By summarizing her own experiences with womanhood and positions of authority and respect, Tohe reveals a tension between white feminist action (such as bra burning) and the reality of life as an Indigenous woman (“Some probably owned only one bra and would not even consider burning it.”).<sup>14</sup> However, Tohe does contend, “When we leave our traditional world and step into the Western world, feminism becomes an issue, and we must confront and deal with the same issues that affect all women,” to which I would add that Indigenous womxn face these “same issues that affect all women” at a higher rate.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, Indigenous Feminisms have become increasingly prevalent in Native spaces (both digital and physical). In their editor’s introduction to a special issue of *Wicazo Sa Review*, Mishuana R. Goeman (Seneca) and Jennifer Nez Denetdale (Diné/Navajo) note the significance of Native feminist work to dismantle the continuing effects of settler-colonialism, which is always enacted in gendered and racialized ways. While acknowledging the problems inherent in the term “feminism,” Goeman and Denetdale prioritize the productive work of a variety of womxn from different nations and communities to (re)conceptualize feminist work in order to simultaneously resist systemic problems all Indigenous womxn (and, to a lesser extent, all womxn) face and

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<sup>13</sup> Laura Tohe, “There is No Word for Feminism in My Language,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 15, no. 2 (2000): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.2000.0014>.

<sup>14</sup> Tohe, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Tohe, 109.

acknowledge the unique gendered and racialized experiences of each nation and community.<sup>16</sup>

In this vein, “My Body is Not Something You Can Land On: Indigenous Feminisms in Erika T. Wurth’s Prose” attempts to enact the methods of de- and anti-colonial frameworks found within Indigenous Feminisms. By de- and anti-colonial frameworks found within Indigenous Feminisms, I mean to follow Joyce Green (English, Ktunaza, and Cree-Scots Metis descent), Andrea Smith, Verna St. Denis (Beardy’s and Okenasis First Nation), Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca), Maile Arvin (Kanakanaka Maoli), Eve Tuck (Unangax and enrolled member of the Aleut Community), Angie Morrill (enrolled member of The Klamath Tribes), Maria Lugones, and more. I use the term “Indigenous Feminisms” as it is defined by Joyce Green in her “Taking Account of Aboriginal Feminism,” which is to say as “a philosophical and political way of conceptualizing, and of resisting, the oppressions that many Aboriginal people experience.”<sup>17</sup> When discussing Indigenous Feminist frameworks, I borrow from Alvin, Tuck, and Morrill’s notion of “Native feminist theories,” defined as “those theories that make substantial advances in understandings of the connections between settler colonialism and both heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism. Native feminist theories focus on compound issues of gender, sexuality, race, indigeneity, and nation.”<sup>18</sup> Indigenous Feminisms have been formed by Indigenous womxn activists and scholars as an alternate path to dismantling systems of settler-mandated oppression; Native feminist

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<sup>16</sup> Mishuana R. Goeman and Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Native Feminisms: Legacies, Interventions, and Indigenous Sovereignities,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 9-11, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.0.0035>.

<sup>17</sup> Joyce Green, “Taking Account of Aboriginal Feminism,” *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, edited by Joyce Green, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing (2007): 30.

<sup>18</sup> Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” *Feminist Formations* 25 (1): 8-34.

theories, then, make up and extend from Indigenous Feminisms. These theories not only allow Indigenous womxn to counter settler-colonial systems that have relegated them to oversexualized and hyper-invisible remnants of a supposedly once-gone population but also provide a way for allies of Native peoples to incorporate de- and anti-colonial frameworks into their practices.

It is my hope that this thesis incorporates Native feminist frameworks in order to enter conversations about the power of literature and stories to write a space for change. Feminist scholarship has made many advances in institutionalizing the study of womxn's stories; however, there is still a tendency in scholarship to relegate any feminist or gendered aspect of the work to a single, often penultimate, chapter. My thesis refuses to continue this trend, instead arguing that it is now (past) time to (re)center womxn and their voices, making them the focal point of our research rather than the obligatory side-note. This is even more significant when it comes to Indigenous womxn's voices not only because of the systemic (and unsuccessful) attempt of the settler-colonial framework to wipe out Indigenous voices but also because Indigenous feminist frameworks allow for decolonial possibilities both for potential presents and futures.

*"Dark and sometimes satiric"*

By looking specifically at Wurth's *You Who Enter Here* and *Buckskin Cocaine*, my thesis explores these potential presents and futures, or at least the ones presented in these texts. However, before entering an in-depth analysis of these texts, it is necessary for me to summarize the two works for those who may be unfamiliar with Wurth's fiction:

Wurth's 2017 short story cycle *Buckskin Cocaine* features eight unique voices, three of which are female identifying. The stories interweave with subtlety, the characters touching but not overpowering one another's narratives. Organized by character from least to most "sympathetic," Wurth's collection provides multiple perspectives of life inside the Native film industry:

I had hung out with a lot of the film people, the film Indians, the Hollywood Indians, who are really the Santa Fe Indians, and they were insane. There are so many dude writers and female writers who are basically sexual predators, people with alcohol problems, with drug problems, who are ego-driven beyond belief. That's still nothing compared to the Native film industry.<sup>19</sup>

*Buckskin Cocaine*, then, is "a dark and sometimes satiric" story where realities of the toxic film industry are not hidden but, rather, put on display. Each character—in some way—has experienced trauma as an Indigenous person living in a settler-colonial state; however, their reactions to this trauma are varied and immensely personal. In other words, whereas their traumas stem from systemic oppression inherent in settler-colonial frameworks, their characters cannot and should not be made representative of Indigenous peoples as a whole. Instead, these characters speak only for themselves, revealing the numerous ways that settler-colonial expectations impact their daily life.

*Buckskin Cocaine's* characters struggle to cope with their lived realities, or, more particularly, they struggle to cope with the effects of internalized settler colonialism and settler heteropatriarchy. From Barry Four Voices, whose violent tendencies against women who won't let him "tell [his] story" mirror the tone of Donald Trump ("Because I'm famous because I'm rich..."), to Olivia James, who is constantly being misinterpreted

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<sup>19</sup> Erika T. Wurth, "Visible: Women Writers of Color: Erika T. Wurth," interview by Deesha Philyaw, *The Rumpus*, August 23, 2017, <https://therumpus.net/2017/08/visible-women-writers-of-color-erika-t-wurth/>.

by the men around her despite her attempt to write her own story, the characters constantly question their place in the world—both the larger world in general and the smaller community that is the Native film industry.<sup>20</sup>

Wurth's most recent novel, *You Who Enter Here*, came out in early 2019. Centered around Matthew, a young Apache, Navajo, and white boy living in Albuquerque as a member of a Native American gang called "the 505s," *You Who Enter Here* explores the violence that Matthew both experiences and perpetuates.<sup>21</sup> Matthew, whose mother was an addict who had relationships with men who would abuse her and her children, begins the novel having been taken under the wing of Chris, who is slowly gaining responsibility as a leader of the 505s. At the outset, Chris is dating Maria, who slips in and out of the narrative due to her addiction to the drug "H" and her on-and-off again relationship with Chris. Matthew is in love with Maria from the start, and, as their relationship develops, Matthew's life with the 505s, as well as the stability of the 505s in general, begins to simultaneously fall apart. The novel reaches its climax when Matthew, Chris, Maria, and Math (a young upstart in the 505s gang) come head-to-head when Chris discovers that Maria has "betrayed" him by sleeping with Matthew and planning to run away with him. Chris's discovery leads to a stand-off between the four characters, with Math, Matthew, and Chris pulling guns on one another. When Matthew shoots to keep Chris from killing him and Maria, Matthew ends up killing Maria before dropping his gun: "'What--?' Matthew said, looking around, wondering why he was still alive, and unhurt. Maria was dead. He had shot her."<sup>22</sup> Matthew, then, falls into his alcoholism and lives out the rest of his life on the streets, first in Albuquerque and then in Denver. It is in

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<sup>20</sup> Erika T. Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine* (Vermillion: Astrophil Press, 2016), 1, 60-111.

<sup>21</sup> Erika T. Wurth, *You Who Enter Here* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 215.

Denver where Matthew begins to think about taking back ownership of his life before being murdered by a group of white young men who mistake him as Mexican and enact violence on him because of this misidentification.<sup>23</sup>

Both *Buckskin Cocaine* and *You Who Enter Here* tell stories about what it means to be an Indigenous person in the settler-colonial society that exists in the United States. Moreover, these texts tell stories about what it means to be an Indigenous womxn in the settler-colonial society that exists in the United States. Even more specifically, these texts tell stories about what it means to be an Indigenous womxn in the settler colonial society that exists in the United States and has been internalized within Native spaces and peoples. This thesis explores what we gain from telling these stories, simultaneously refusing to ignore the internalized heteropatriarchy in these spaces and addressing the paths forward to (re)Indigenizing these spaces.

In the first chapter I provide a combination of a literature review focusing on Indigenous Feminisms and an analysis of the characters of Candy Francois and Lucy Bigboca in *Buckskin Cocaine*. Through these two genres of criticism I interrogate not only the place of feminism in Indigenous communities but also the place of Indigenous womxn in feminism. My argument is two-fold: first, that white anti-feminist rhetoric has been used to discredit feminism in Indigenous communities and, thus, Native womxn have been reluctant to identify as feminists despite their continual work to create equality among genders; and, second, that white feminism has both consciously and unconsciously erased and discouraged participation from Indigenous womxn and other womxn of color, making the current model of mainstream (read: white) feminism incompatible with Indigenous feminisms. Lucy Bigboca, then, provides insight into the

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<sup>23</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*.

lived experiences of some Indigenous womxn, particularly those who argue they “don’t need feminism” while pushing back against the settler patriarchy in their daily practices.<sup>24</sup>

In the second chapter I focus on *You Who Enter Here*, looking primarily at the characters of Maria, Matthew, and Chris to talk about the effects of internalized heteropatriarchal models on young Native communities. I explore how the gang life genre is (re)conceptualized through Wurth’s understanding of what current possibilities are provided for Native youths in general. I argue that the Maria’s treatment is significant as it points to the very real violence Native womxn and girls face daily without fully villainizing Indigenous men as the inherent source. Matthew and Chris, as the Indigenous men who enact the most violence against Maria, should be condemned for their actions, but it is clear that they too have been harmed by settler-colonial frameworks that not only allow for but promote violence against Indigenous womxn.

Overall, my thesis hopes to serve as an entryway into my own thinking about how Indigenous Feminisms are presented in literary texts. As I continue forward in my career, I hope to continue asking these questions: Why does it matter that Erika T. Wurth is writing womxn this way? Does it matter if I, as a white, settler woman, write about this? Does it matter if the institution cares?

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<sup>24</sup> Erika T. Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine* (Astrophil Press, 2017), 33.



## PART ONE

### NOT YOUR MOTHER'S FEMINISM

*“that’s colonizing anyway”*

Lucy Bigboca has no need for feminism. “I mean, like Native women don’t need feminism,” she exclaims, “because for example, I’m the one that’s been in control in all of my relationships? So, I don’t even need that stuff, that’s colonizing anyway.”<sup>25</sup> As the “ONLY REALLY traditional Navajo in Albuquerque,” Lucy identifies as a “strong Native woman,” and throughout her narration, she affirms her dominant position over the men in her life.<sup>26</sup> However, a close reading of Wurth’s *Buckskin Cocaine* shows how, despite Lucy’s framing of herself as an authentic Navajo woman who is “in control in all of [her] relationships,” the other (read: male) narrators refuse to value her beyond her usefulness as a sexual object. Wurth’s own statement about being an Indigenous woman within the settler patriarchy is echoed in the sentiment. Speaking specifically about the struggles of publishing as a woman of color, Wurth asserts, “There are these endless permutations of how you’ll win, and men will treat you nicely, and they’ll respect you.

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<sup>25</sup> Erika T. Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine* (Astrophil Press, 2017), 33.

<sup>26</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin*, 31.

As if that's the only thing that matters. That's what's funny about being an Indian woman. We don't need their respect. They need ours."<sup>27</sup> Wurth recognizes that "you can't win" as a womxn of color trying to get published and responds with the confidence of someone who will write what she wants to regardless of this fact.<sup>28</sup> Lucy justifies her actions through the lens of "tradition," wherein tradition is connected to how men see and respond to her, while simultaneously demanding recognition and (re)affirming her own authority. In this way Wurth writes Lucy into the liminal space that exists between the manufactured binary of feminist and Indigenous, one that many Native womxn must navigate.

Further, Lucy's syntax discredits not only her self-affirmed authenticity but also her authority in general. Upon a first reading of *Buckskin Cocaine*, Lucy's story lacks structure. She rambles about how wonderful and authentic she is, and she claims that her Navajo heritage allows her to be inherently talented at any activity she deems traditional—speaking the Navajo language, making frybread, being a weaver.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, a closer look reveals an emerging storyline. Lucy opens with an introduction: "I'm Lucy Bigboca!!! LOL, right? I mean, like everyone doesn't know me already???"<sup>30</sup> Ironically, Lucy goes on to explain just who she is: a graduate of IAIA, a participant in the film world, an artist, and, most importantly, a 'traditional' Navajo

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<sup>27</sup> Erika T. Wurth, "Visible: Women of Color: Erika T. Wurth," *The Rumpus*, by Deesha Philyaw, Aug. 23, 2017, <https://therumpus.net/2017/08/visible-women-writers-of-color-erika-t-wurth/>. Accessed 27 March 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 31-35; Wurth, "Visible."

<sup>29</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin*, 31, 32, 35.

I have placed the word "blood" in italics in order to emphasize the inadequacy of the term. Blood, in this sentence, should be thought of as familial genetics. It is, according to Lucy, in Lucy's *blood* to be good at these cultural activities. It is not that she was taught by either of her parents about these practices but, rather, that there is a generational knowledge inherent in her.

<sup>30</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin*, 31.

woman.<sup>31</sup> Lucy's narrative, however, is not really centered around any of these facts; instead, her overarching story is about how Native men have treated her in the past, particularly "Steven Littlebrush."<sup>32</sup> When combining Lucy's assertion that "Native women don't need feminism" with her lived experiences in heterosexual relationships, it becomes clear that Lucy, like many Native women, has been inculcated in the heteronormative, anti-feminist culture that is perpetuated by the settler government and, significantly, incorporated in Native organizations, governments, and communities through settler colonial influence.

In an interview with Deesha Philyaw in *The Rumpus* concerning the lack of visibility for women writers of color, Wurth asserts:

"It's similar to how women will have these infinite conversations. 'Well, I don't dress like *this*, and I don't do that, but she does that and that means this... and well, I'll do *this*, and then I'll be a good girl.' There are these endless permutations of how you'll win, and men will treat you nicely, and they'll respect you. As if that's the only thing that matters. That's what's funny about being an Indian woman. We don't need their respect. They need ours."<sup>33</sup>

Lucy Bigboca, I argue, is a character that embodies both sentiments. On one hand, she justifies all her actions through the lens of 'tradition,' and it must be acknowledged that these actions are always connected to how men see and respond to her. On the other hand, she continuously demands recognition and (re)affirms her own authority despite

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<sup>31</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin*, 31, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Erika T. Wurth, "Visible: Women Writes of Color: Erika T. Wurth," *The Rumpus*, by Deesha Philyaw, 23 August 2017, <https://therumpus.net/2017/08/visible-women-writers-of-color-erika-t-wurth/>. Accessed 27 March 2019.

pushback from the world—and men—around her. For this reason, Lucy, like so many other Native women, operates in a liminal space that exists between the manufactured binary of feminist and Indigenous. The following section of my paper will address the ways this binary is developed and maintained both in white settler society and Indigenous spaces.

Joanne Barker (Lenape), in a chapter of Robert Warrior's (Osage) *The World of Indigenous America*, provides a thorough overview of how Indigeneity and gender interact both pre- and post-European settlement.<sup>34</sup> In a quick explanation of the stages of white feminist theory and practice, Barker criticizes the adherence to binaries (female/male, settler/Indigenous, good/bad), as rhetorical markers for the supposed inferiority of the female gender to its male counterpart. Furthermore, Barker summarizes, binaries inherently erase the realities of intersectionality because they are unable to account for multiplicities of identity.<sup>35</sup> That being said, Barker also condemns theories that promote the binary of Indigenous or feminist onto Indigenous women who may or may not claim the title of feminist. Indigeneity, Barker argues, cannot entirely be separated from the settler colonial structures that have been imposed upon Nations and peoples, and, thus, gender discrimination both within and without Indigenous communities must be treated as serious issues within Indigenous activism.<sup>36</sup>

Moving from theory to personal practice, Verna St. Denis (Cree, Metis, Beardsy's and Okemasis First Nation) speaks of the pressures Indigenous women face when they

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<sup>34</sup> Joanne Barker, "Gender," in *The World of Indigenous America*, edited by Robert Warrior (New York: Routledge, 2015), 506-523.

<sup>35</sup> Barker, 508.

<sup>36</sup> Barker, 512-514.

don't reject feminism as a solely white, middle-class issue.<sup>37</sup> Denis openly admits, "There was a time when I believed, as others have stated, that organizing women of the world against gender inequality under a banner of universal sisterhood both minimized and erased social, economic and political differences between vastly differently positioned women, particularly Aboriginal women."<sup>38</sup> This is a common critique of white feminism, as it often operates with the assumption that every woman faces the same level of discrimination and prejudice, regardless of race, socio-economic standing, sexual orientation, etc. However, Denis points out that while some Indigenous women discredit feminist texts, they often do so while citing white male scholars. Dennis states, "Although we, Aboriginal women, may utilize Western forms of knowledge, theory and analysis, and even seek legitimization through educational credentials obtained in Western institutions, it is still common for Aboriginal women to disapprove of feminism and somethings, ironically, cite white men to do so."<sup>39</sup> In other words, even though Indigenous women's criticism of the failing of white feminism to adequately address the problems of BIPOC women should be taken seriously, it is also important to address the underlying motivations of the white male scholars they sometimes cite, who are protecting their own privilege by discrediting their white feminist counterparts. In this way, Denis's argument points to places where feminism can be used to address not only the systemic and actual violence committed predominantly against Indigenous women but also racism and sexism as it is discussed in an anti-racist classroom.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Verna St. Denis, "Feminism is for Everybody: Aboriginal Women, Feminism and Diversity," in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, edited by Joyce Green (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 42-62.

<sup>38</sup> Denis, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Denis, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Denis, 43, 55, 59.

The word “traditional” is used in Lucy’s narration twenty-three times, and five times this word is emphasized by having each letter capitalized. Traditional is defined by Lucy in a number of ways: being “in charge,” knowing the Navajo language, being an artist, being able to cook frybread, getting married and having a family, and living with her mother despite being old enough to move out.<sup>41</sup> Simultaneously, Lucy defines what is not traditional: “try[ing] to beat a strong Native woman down,” living on a reservation, not knowing how to cook frybread in a specific way, dating multiple women at once, and marrying “some stupid white girl.”<sup>42</sup> These are the tenets by which Lucy lives her life, doing everything she can to ensure she is placed in the category of traditional. For Lucy, however, being *traditional* means being Navajo and does not take into account other aspects of her identity, such as Pueblo, female, artist, and so on. Lucy identifies her own mixed heritage of Pueblo (on her father’s side) and Navajo (on her mother’s) when she criticizes her ex-boyfriend for his own lack of *traditionalism*: “Plus he’s like, two tribes and like, even though I am too, I’m like, CLEARLY a Navajo woman, like, CLEARLY.”<sup>43</sup> Lucy, through the framing of her sentence, claims that she is not “two tribes.” Instead she is solely Navajo, regardless of any genetic arguments for her being from two separate tribes. In light of a history within the United States, and other settler states, of policing identity through tribal membership, approval and disapproval of miscegenation, and blood quantum rules questions of identity and authenticity are of utmost importance when discussing how Indigenous peoples were and are affected by

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<sup>41</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 31, 32, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 31, 33, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 34.

The word *traditional* and *traditionalism* is italicized to point the discrepancies between how Lucy defines these concepts and how they may be seen not only by the other characters of *Buckskin Cocaine* but also by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

settler colonialism. Lucy challenges blood quantum directly when she identifies herself as entirely Navajo even though federally she would be recognized otherwise.

As mentioned, Lucy identifies solely as Navajo. She is aware of her Pueblo heritage, and her father has provided her access to this culture by taking her to ceremonies and powwows. She reminisces about before he passed with cancer, saying, “When my daddy was alive I would go all the time to the Pueblo rez where he was from and we’d do ceremony. And he loved me more than anyone, more than any of his other kids, LOL!!!”<sup>44</sup> Lucy’s love for her father is evident, and her desire to find someone that loves her as much as her father did is the impetus for her narrative. However, Lucy ties the entirety of her being to her Navajo heritage, and she does so despite having these kinship ties and cultural knowledges from her father, who is Pueblo. Moreover, the male narrators who address Lucy’s heritage see her as primarily Pueblo, primarily due to her physical characteristics. When George Bull notices Lucy staring at him, he notes that she looks “like an angry Pueblo cat,” and, later, Mark Wishewas off-handedly addresses Lucy, whom he has slept with, as a “crazy Pueblo bitch.”<sup>45</sup> In both of these examples Lucy is identified in a way that is counter to her own identification of herself, showing how there is a total disregard of Lucy’s desires and self-identification, and, by questioning the authenticity of Lucy as we read the book due to her language and actions, we are also disregarding her lived experiences.

Further interrogating the discrepancies between Lucy’s assertion of her Navajo identity and how others see her reveals the integration of patriarchal codes of identity in Native spaces. While tribes and Nations are in no way uniform, and some had patriarchal

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<sup>44</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 21, 58.

systems prior to European settlement, a seemingly universal sense of patriarchal lineage developed only after the imposition of a white settler society and government. In other words, paternal identification became more important under settler colonialism as a form of control that furthered the settler goal of keeping the image of ‘Indianness’ without the reality of living Indigenous peoples.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, we know Lucy’s Navajo identity comes through her maternal line because we are told that her mother speaks the Navajo language and that her father was from one of the Pueblo Nations.<sup>47</sup> Lucy’s preoccupation with her strength as a Navajo woman adheres more to the matrilineal roots of the Navajo Nation than to the patriarchal structure of the settler state. In this way, Lucy incorporates Navajo practices into her daily identity formation. The same behavior would be seen as a radical act of self-love and feminism in white, middle-class society, but for Lucy it is not radical—it is traditional. Still, it would be irresponsible to dismiss this as sheer traditionalism because, as mentioned, Lucy’s motivations do tend to center around heteronormative patriarchal values, such as finding a husband and raising a nuclear family with him.

Whether the desire stems entirely from societal expectations or not, Lucy’s primary goal in her life is to achieve the nuclear family that is essential in mainstream white society, although Lucy’s dedication to finding a partner as *traditional* as herself rejects the idea of whiteness as a prerequisite to this dream. However, another complication to Lucy’s ideal future nuclear family is the fact that she theoretically had the opportunity to make this dream a reality but decided instead to not have the child with Stephen. Lucy explains, “I’m not the only one that got pregnant with him either,” which

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<sup>46</sup> Mary Eberts, “Being an Indigenous Woman Is a ‘High-Risk Lifestyle’,” in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, edited by Joyce Green (Halifax: Fernwood Press, 2017), 80-92.

<sup>47</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 32-33.



indicates the reality of the situation—that even if she had kept the child it would be more likely that she would have become a single mother than Stephen staying.<sup>48</sup> So Lucy does not have the child, saying, “I didn’t even tell him, because I was scared it would push him away.”<sup>49</sup> Still, despite her insight into how Stephen will react to her pregnancy at that point in their relationship, Lucy imagines a future in which she achieves this life: “And I thought, it’s OK, we’ll have a baby later, when I’m older and settled and own my own house and am ready.”<sup>50</sup> Just as she does when discussing her relationship with me, Lucy goes back and forth on children, the one she decided not to have and the potential for one in the future.

Lucy’s story ends with her imagining what may have been if she had kept the baby: “I wonder what it would be like with Steven, like, if I’d told him about the baby and if he would have cut it off with all of those other bitches and maybe we could have gotten a place together??? I think about me in the hospital holding a little fuzzy headed baby, Stephen by my side.”<sup>51</sup> Lucy imagines a future that is centered around the nuclear family, one that mirrors the one she had growing up with her mother and father, and the fact that she has yet to realize this dream and has no current prospects for doing so in the near future provides her with the impetus for one of her most vulnerable moments. The vulnerability, nevertheless, does not last long. Instead, Lucy reacts by falling back of her favorite concept: *tradition*. Lucy exclaims, “NO ONE is going to bring a TRADITIONAL woman down! That’s not how I grew up, that’s not who I am!!!”<sup>52</sup> Significantly this is one of the few moments that Lucy identifies herself as a woman

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<sup>48</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 35.

without the caveat of being a Navajo woman or a Native woman, and, although she quickly adds this identity marker in the next sentence, there is an acknowledgement of the universality of her experience. It is not just Navajo women who struggle in the way that she does but all women, and it is in her most vulnerable moment that she recognizes this. This, of course, does not mean that her experiences are not racialized, but, rather, that under this racialization there is a gendered component that affects both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women.

While motherhood is not universal in the sense that all women can or do have children, there is a sense of the lived experience of motherhood (or the lack thereof) as foundational in the formation of womanhood. Motherhood is simultaneously a requirement of socially acceptable womanhood and a detriment to female independence, as being a single mother is both difficult financially and socially punished. Lucy, as someone who envisions her future as one in which she is in a heterosexual relationship with a child, has a complex relationship with her own role as someone who is not a mother but wishes to be one. Even though there is a stigma around being a single mother, especially for Indigenous women and women of color, there is typically more of a stigma around having an abortion. Even Lucy, who is rarely shy with her words, won't say the word out loud, instead opting to tell that she "took care of it."<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that her decision to not have her child is two-fold; on the one hand, she seems to realize that she is not financially nor emotionally ready for a child, but she also wants to protect her relationship with Stephen and thinks telling him that she is pregnant will put it in jeopardy.<sup>54</sup> In this way Lucy is simultaneously enacting her own agency by making the

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<sup>53</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 34.

decision to have the abortion and being compelled by societal pressures to make decisions centered around a man's (assumed) needs or wants rather than her own.

We are first introduced to Lucy Bigboca by George Bull, a filmmaker who hires only Navajo actors for his films, although this does not stop him from sleeping with Native women who aren't Navajo under the guise of making them famous.<sup>55</sup> Amidst a string of misogynist language about any woman who crosses his path, George introduces a particular "obnoxious Native chick named Lucy."<sup>56</sup> Soon after her introduction, George, exasperated by her presence, groans about her "weird Albuquerque almost valley girl accent."<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Mark Wishewas, the only other narrator to directly address Lucy, echoes these sentiments, as he calls her a "crazy bitch," and these emotions stem from her supposed attachment to him after they "hooked up."<sup>58</sup> Both of these male perspectives on Lucy dismiss her as vapid, shallow, and needy. George depicts Lucy hanging off him, desperate for attention he has no interest in giving her, and, Mark makes his lack of interest in Lucy clear, despite his obvious interest in her as a sexual object. In this way, our own dismissal of Lucy is affirmed—everyone else (read: every male) is already doing it.

Lucy's own narration does little to combat the stereotypes George and Mark apply to her. Every character that exists in the world of *Buckskin Cocaine* is problematic, as Wurth confirms in an interview but they maintain a language that allows them to keep up the allusion of control over their own lives, even if this is not represented in their

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<sup>55</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 20-21.

<sup>58</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 49.

actions.<sup>59</sup> Barry Four Voices, Gary Hollywood, Robert Two Stories, and Mark Wishewas all—for the most part—keep their actual thoughts to themselves, revealing the worst parts only to us who have an inside pass into his mind, who has unobstructed access to their innermost thoughts. Further, even though Candy Francois and Olivia James can both see through men’s veils of respectability, the male narrators play their parts well. Likewise, Candy and Olivia both perform a level of respectability through their words and the image of themselves they present. In this way, Candy’s mantra of “I was in my early twenties, I was a model, I lived in New York” can be read as a stage direction—a reminder to herself of the role she is playing.<sup>60</sup> On the one hand, she knows the motivations of the men around her and how to use them to gain access to a wider world of ballet performance. On the other hand, however, in order to do so she plays the dual role of sex object to be tamed and dutiful lover ready to be molded.<sup>61</sup> Lucy, then, is unique: she says clearly early on in her narration, “Don’t they know that I should be the one in charge???”<sup>62</sup> Lucy implies that she has ultimate control over men, and she does so openly, without reservation. She claims her authority openly, both to herself and to the other characters of the text.

Overall, Lucy cannot be disregarded as solely naïve and unprepared for the world around her. We must acknowledge the systemic violence, both emotional and physical, enacted by both settler and Indigenous men onto Indigenous women. Further, we must acknowledge that, in light of the far-reaching consequences of settler colonialism, Indigenous women have been caught between politics of racial and gender

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<sup>59</sup> Erika T. Wurth, “An Interview with Erika T. Wurth,” by Michael Noll, 28 September 2017, <https://readtowritestories.com/2017/09/28/an-interview-with-erika-t-wurth/>. Accessed 4 March 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 8, 9, 11, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 60-111.

<sup>62</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 31.

discrimination, all of which are used against them to call them out for being inauthentic or non-traditional if they step outside of the status quo.

*(Mis)Representation*

Candy Francois's (Ojibwe and Cree) repeating line gives us insight into her values: "I was in my early twenties, I was a model, I lived in New York."<sup>63</sup> This is how she defines herself. But being an "early twenties ... model ... in New York" is not special; there are many who fit that description. Candy only becomes "unique" when she mentions that she is "the only Native American" in her group of artists.<sup>64</sup> In order to stand out as special among a population of models, Candy uses her Native identity to indicate that--despite her conforming to look and act like models are expected to act and look (white party girls)--she is different (read: better). Candy's Indigeneity, or, rather, settler expectations of her Indianness, also allows her to take on "buckskin gigs" where she "plays" Indian. Candy explains, "sometimes I'd get a buckskin gig for a Native magazine, my face all stoic and my body covered in beads and leather on the cover, and that would be wonderful."<sup>65</sup> In this case, Candy, as an Indigenous woman, is a representation of Native women in media. Her modeling and small acting gigs place her in a visible role where her image is replicated, reproduced, and circulated. At first glance the idea of an Indigenous woman posing in "beads and leather" for a "Native magazine" is empowering. Of all the "gorgeous photos" of Candy, the buckskin gig photos are the ones she sends to her family.<sup>66</sup> However, the empowering aspect of these gigs is questioned when Candy describes them as "dressing up" and admits, "I was happy to

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<sup>63</sup> Erika T. Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine* (Vermillion, SD: Astrophil Press, 2017), 8, 9, 11, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 8.

play anything. I could pass for a lot of ethnicities.”<sup>67</sup> Playing Indian, then, is not limited to these gigs, as she also rhetorically connects her attendance at “powwow [and] ceremony” to the act of playing a part.<sup>68</sup> In other words, Candy’s identity as a model and aspiring actress extends to all aspects of her identity and keeps her from claiming authenticity.

Candy utilizes her Native identity as a tool to get “buckskin gigs,” but she is just a quick to dismiss this identity when it benefits her, particularly through the changing of her physical appearance. When she claims to be able to “pass for a lot of ethnicities,” Candy trivializes her participation in the “buckskin gigs” because it is one of a large number of “parts” she can play, rather than a key piece of her representing her family and history. Candy mentions having “dyed [her] hair blonde once,” indicating not only her tendency to “play” racial stereotypes but also her impulse to perform whiteness.<sup>69</sup> But what are the consequences of Candy’s physical transformation? Significantly, these consequences go beyond the mental and emotional trauma of internalized racism, there are also physical affects. Kristen Simmons writes about the effects of “*atmoterror*” and the use of tear gas—a form of chemical warfare—against Indigenous protestors, speaking both broadly and of her own experience at Standing Rock, and, thus, Simmons suggests that there are world and nation-wide consequences to targeted colonial violence.<sup>70</sup> The same can be said of the chemicals used in beauty products that encourage assimilation into white beauty standards. In 2017, just a month before Simmons’s article about the literal toxicity of colonialism, *Popular Science*’s Kendra Pierre-Louis published an article

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<sup>67</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Kristen Simmons, “Settler Atmospherics,” *Society for Cultural Anthropology*, Nov. 20, 2017. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/settler-atmospherics>.

about the “literally toxic” consequences of white beauty standards.<sup>71</sup> Just as Simmons points to the generalized consequences of releasing toxic chemicals into the atmosphere (which means effects on both people of color and white settlers), Pierre-Louis points to the general use of increasing numbers of toxic beauty products; however, women of color are the most affected in both cases. Women of color, Pierre-Louis explains, must use a disproportionate amount of these toxic products to adhere to these standards: “the beauty standards in question—such as lighter skin and straighter, less coiled hair—are much more dangerous to achieve. To do so, women of color must expose themselves to an additional battery of chemicals that white women do not. The end result is that women of color have higher levels of beauty-related environmental chemicals in their body, irrespective of socio-economic status.”<sup>72</sup> In this way, Candy’s dying her hair blonde—which requires bleach and is known to be harmful to one’s hair in the long-term—is just another form of toxicity in her life, another deadly aspect of her career as a model and actress.

Candy’s understanding of beauty is clearly framed through a white standard. She says, “There are so many gorgeous photos of me. And I’m beautiful in every one of them; thin, perfect, frozen in time.”<sup>73</sup> The three aspects of beauty that she acknowledges, “thin, perfect, frozen in time,” are tied to colonial expectations. The oversexualization of and subsequent sexual violence against Indigenous women has been widely researched. Perhaps the most well-known example is Pocahontas, whose image is constantly reproduced as representative of Native women’s insatiable desire for colonialism and the

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<sup>71</sup> Kendra Pierre-Louis, “Beauty standards are literally toxic for women of color,” *Popular Science*, Aug. 16, 2017. <https://www.popsci.com/personal-care-products-are-especially-toxic-for-women-color>.

<sup>72</sup> Pierre-Louis, [Links in original]. <https://www.popsci.com/personal-care-products-are-especially-toxic-for-women-color>.

<sup>73</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 8.

white men who come with it, and Candy is a descendent of this colonial myth. Candy's image, likewise, is "frozen in time" and reveals the desired outcome of settler colonialism: keep the Native image while destroying the Native peoples. Or, as General Richard H. Pratt said, "Kill the Indian, and save the man."<sup>74</sup> It is not only a commentary on the expectation on women to stay young and beautiful but also a continuation of white settler demands that Native peoples remain in the past, never to complicate the present.

Candy, as the mantra "I was in my early twenties, I was a model, I lived in New York" suggests, cannot imagine a future for herself: "because getting older wasn't real, it wasn't something I ever thought about, it didn't even exist."<sup>75</sup> As discussed, within mainstream media there is a lack of possible futures available for Indigenous peoples in general and Indigenous women specifically. This is most often seen in science fiction and speculative fiction as these genres most often provide potential futures, whether dystopic, utopic, or somewhere in between. Oftentimes in these genres it is a given that Indigenous populations have disappeared, an expected outcome that is embedded in the settler colonial framework, and, as Danika Medak-Saltzman explains, even when Indigenous representation is included it is rather done well. Rather, many mediums provide only "one-dimensional usage[s]" that are framed through a settler perspective rather than an Indigenous one. Medak-Saltzman states, "This is a manner of appropriation that provides a veneer of cultural diversity that functions as an easily employable way to add 'flavor' to mainstream narratives, and/or a means to take on the appearance of inclusivity, but that ultimately serves to reinforce, rather than change, audience expectations about

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<sup>74</sup> Kyle L. Simonson and Gavin M. Nadeau, "Truth and Reconciliation: 'Kill the Indian, and Save the Man,'" *Native Times*, Dec. 3, 2016, <https://www.nativetimes.com/archives/46-life/commentary/14059-truth-and-reconciliationkill-the-indian-and-save-the-man>.

<sup>75</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 8.



Indigenous peoples.”<sup>76</sup> In this way, Candy’s personal inability to access her future mirrors the broad depiction of Indigenous peoples as historical relics rather than existing individuals and Nations. Even though *Buckskin Cocaine* is neither science fiction nor fantasy, the story is, in many ways, post-apocalyptic—by which I mean that one world, the settler-colonial world, is in the process of collapsing. The question, then, becomes: If the settler-colonial world is collapsing, what world will be built in its absence?

The narrative of Candy does not imply a lack of potential futures. Candy’s ambition has seemingly been distinguished by the toxicity of the world around her. Her refrain ends with a slight alteration: “I stared at the empty white walls. There was nothing. My God, six months ago, I was in my early twenties, I was a model, I lived in New York.”<sup>77</sup> The glory she attributes to her life as a model is over, and she is left with “nothing.” Despite her conforming to the image provided to her by the film world around her and on screen, Candy has been dismissed and replaced by younger versions of herself. What seems to be a bitter end, however, opens possibilities. Candy is able to clearly see, in those final moments of her narration, the performance that is her identity, and, even if she does not end up being able to escape this performance, the acknowledgement of it is significant.

The life of Candy that we are privy to is, as has been shown, a performance based on settler-colonial expectations, and, by conforming to these expectations, Candy replicates them. One way to combat the replication is through better representation, which we have seen develop in important ways over the past few years. In the midterm elections of 2018, two Indigenous women were elected to Congress. Rep. Sharice Davids of Kansas is a

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<sup>76</sup> Danika Medak-Saltzman, “Coming to You from the Indigenous Future: Native Women, Speculative Film Shorts, and the Arts of the Possible,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 29, no. 1 (2017): 141.

<sup>77</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 13.

member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, and Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico is enrolled Pueblo of Laguna.<sup>78</sup> During the same election cycle, Peggy Flanagan, a White Earth Nation of Ojibwe citizen became the Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota.<sup>79</sup> Not long after the election of these women, Sivan Alyra Rose (San Carlos Apache) made headlines for being the first Native woman to lead a Netflix TV series.<sup>80</sup> With increasing but still disproportionate amounts of visibility, Indigenous representation, particularly Indigenous female representation, has become a key topic in the news cycle. Representation, as the common quip reminds us, matters.

Still, representation is a complex concept that is often invoked without being interrogated. The Netflix TV show *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* has in its list of characters a Lakota woman named Jacqueline, a woman who broke her ties with her family to move to New York City in search of a better and more rewarding life. However, in keeping with histories of hiring non-Native people to play Native characters, Netflix hired Jane Krakowski, a White woman, to play the role, despite hiring two Native actors to play her parents, and, as Rebecca Nagle (Cherokee) points out, “The show teaches its vastly non-Native audience that assimilation works, that the Indian who breaks all the stereotypes is really just White.”<sup>81</sup> Nagle criticizes *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* as the latest in a long line of shows to **mis**represent Indigenous women, but misrepresentation,

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<sup>78</sup> Vincent Schilling, “HERSTORY! Deb Haaland, Sharice Davids in Congress and Peggy Flanagan as Lt. Gov.,” *Indian Country Today* (Washington D.C.), Nov. 7, 2018.

[https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/news/herstory-deb-haaland-sharice-davids-in-congress-and-peggy-flanagan-as-lt-gov-uq-pHFLPL0Sp\\_9eimci2jA/](https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/news/herstory-deb-haaland-sharice-davids-in-congress-and-peggy-flanagan-as-lt-gov-uq-pHFLPL0Sp_9eimci2jA/).

<sup>79</sup> “Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan,” *Office of Governor Tim Walz & Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan*, accessed May 29, 2019. <https://mn.gov/governor/about/peggyflanagan.jsp>.

<sup>80</sup> Vincent Schilling, “First Native actress starring in a Netflix series, Sivan Alyra Rose talks about ‘Chambers,’” *Indian Country Today* (Washington D.C.), Apr. 29, 2019. <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/lifestyle/first-native-actress-starring-in-a-netflix-series-sivan-alyra-rose-talks-about-chambers-Ng6n-9GEKEixhampdFIGWA/>; Chambers was later canceled after the first season by Netflix, leading to a widespread backlash from Native Twitter and Instagram accounts (see Vincent Schilling, “Indian Country reels as Netflix cancels show with first Native female lead: ‘Chambers,’” *Indian Country Today*, June 19, 2019, <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/lifestyle/indian-country-reels-as-netflix-cancels-show-with-first-native-female-lead-chambers-hLi2fZtsd02I7h8wg9rRjQ/>; Joe Otterson, “‘Chambers’ Canceled After One Season at Netflix,” *Variety*, June 18, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/chambers-canceled-netflix-1203247046/>).

<sup>81</sup> Rebecca Nagle, “Media representation of Native women: invisibility, stereotypes, whitewashing,” *Women’s Media Center*, June 12, 2018. <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/news-features/media-representation-of-native-women-invisibility-stereotypes-whitewashing>.

as Wurth shows us through her character Candy Francois, can just as easily occur when a Native woman is in front of the camera.

## PART TWO

### TOXIC (SETTLER) MASCULINITY

#### *Demystified (Again)*

An email notification lights up the screen of my phone, and a headline from NPR catches my attention: “‘Heartbeat of Wounded Knee’ Demystifies the Modern Native Experience.” The NPR interview is between Scott Simon and David Treuer, and, as the headline suggests, they are discussing Treuer’s newest book about Indigenous history post-1890. Simon begins the interview with the sentiment that is echoed in the article’s title, saying, “Chapter after chapter, it’s like one shattered myth after another. And I say that with great respect.”<sup>82</sup> The importance of “shattering myths” about the disappearing Indian, the reservation Indian, and other stereotypes imposed on Native peoples cannot be understated; however, articles such as these remind me that each new attempt to dispel these myths, if it gets any media attention at all, is often framed as the first attempt. Treuer, in this interview, reveals the great secret that is revealed repeatedly without much fanfare by various scholars, historians, authors, and activists both Indigenous and otherwise: “like a lot of populations, we [Indigenous peoples] moved from rural areas to

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<sup>82</sup> Scott Simon, “‘Heartbeat of Wounded Knee’ Demystifies the Modern Native Experience,” *NPR* (19 January 2019).

urban areas.”<sup>83</sup> Despite what the NPR headline implies, the “Modern Native Experience” has been “Demystified” before and will be again.

In fact, it is not only in non-fiction that the white settler myths are dispelled but also in the fiction genre, where authors such as Wurth are writing about what it means to be an Indigenous person living in urban areas under settler colonialism. Wurth’s first novel and most recent publication, *You Who Enter Here*, tells the story of Matthew, a young Apache and Navajo boy who becomes a member of a Native gang in Albuquerque called “the 505s.”<sup>84</sup> Matthew finds a father figure in the slightly older Chris, who sobered him up and took him off the streets, but he also finds a love interest in Maria, Chris’s long-term girlfriend.<sup>85</sup> With this love triangle jumpstarting the conflict of the novel, these three primary characters live out their daily existences within a system that is not only set up for them to fail but is also quite literally killing them—through drugs, incarceration, addiction, and self-destructive violence.

*You Who Enter Here* begins with Chris asking Matthew a deceptively simple question: “You ever held a gun before?”<sup>86</sup> The novel then follows this question to its logical conclusion, with all but a few characters dying at the hands of someone they love and trust. Another author who wrote about what it means to be both Indigenous and urban, Tommy Orange, in an interview with *The New Yorker*, talks about his novel *There There*. Orange explains that he has “struggle[d] to get to a place where [he] can firmly identify as Native,” and the same struggle drives his characters, all of whom gather at the final powwow in Oakland which serves as the literal space in which they can, at least

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Erika T. Wurth, *You Who Enter Here* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 1-8.

<sup>85</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 1-11.

<sup>86</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 1.

temporarily, claim Indigeneity.<sup>87</sup> While the questions asked in *There There* may not be the same ones asked in *You Who Enter Here*, their shared traits of bloodshed and violence bring up a larger concern about how contemporary Native literature, particularly those texts that tell the stories of modern and urban Indigenous peoples, represent these populations.

Likewise, Coll Thrush ends *Native Seattle* with a question: “*What happened here?*”<sup>88</sup> The question, Thrush explains, was meant to have been answered in the (re)telling of Seattle’s history, a place where Indigenous peoples and settlers have interacted with one another repeatedly over time in ways that have been both peaceful and violent. *You Who Enter Here* answers this same question, not for Seattle but for Albuquerque, and not through a historical “*re-storying*” but, rather, through the realistic yet fictional stories of her characters.<sup>89</sup> Much like Thrush, Wurth does not soften her answer. “*What happened*” in Albuquerque, in the United States, was and is violent, was and is harmful to Indigenous peoples physically, emotionally, mentally, and culturally. Wurth does not erase these traumas because, as Waziyatawin argues in “Colonialism on the Ground,” to do so is to decontextualize the present.<sup>90</sup>

*You Who Enter Here* is a story about teenagers. Moreover, *You Who Enter Here* is a story about Indigenous youths, complete with their own histories and experiences that vary person-to-person, and, in this case, the children have adopted one another as a

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<sup>87</sup> Deborah Treisman, “Tommy Orange on Native Representation,” *The New Yorker* (19 March 2018); Tommy Orange, *There There* (New York: Knopf, 2018).

<sup>88</sup> Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 207.

<sup>89</sup> Thrush, 204.

<sup>90</sup> Waziyatawin, “Colonialism on the Ground,” in *Unsettling Ourselves: Reflections and Resources for Deconstructing Colonial Mentality*, compiled by the Unsettling Minnesota collective (Self-Published, 2009), 192-99.

chosen family to replace their biological families. Their biological families, particularly their mothers, are spoken of rarely and only in relation to childhood trauma.

When Maria enters the narrative of *You Who Enter Here*, she does so through Matthew, but, more importantly, she does so through Matthew's conflation of Maria and his mother. In one paragraph, Matthew reveals not only his alcoholism but also that of his mother: "When Matthew allowed himself to think about why he drank, which wasn't very often, he thought about running up to his mother when he was very little, hoping she'd hold him, let him sit on his lap. She smelled of lavender soap and beer."<sup>91</sup> Imagery of Matthew and his sister being abandoned and ignored are juxtaposed with the drunken exuberance of his mother and the men she brings into their home, and from this imagery emerges Maria: "That was the thing with Maria. She was tough, like his mom. But she also knew how to be sweet. Sweet in a way that got to him."<sup>92</sup> Maria, like Matthew's mother, is out of reach; just as Matthew's mother is kept from him by the men she sleeps with, Chris is Maria's boyfriend and, thus, Maria is theoretically untouchable. But this is not the only similarity between the two women. Maria is also an addict, although her addiction is to "H," not alcohol.<sup>93</sup> Maria's correlation to Matthew's mother frames her and Matthew's relationship throughout the narrative and defines Maria as the ultimate femme fatale. She is at once irresistible and the catalyst of destruction. Matthew, while dating Sharina (a friend of Maria), compares the two girls, saying, "[Sharina] was a survivor, but she wasn't a fighter. She was too much like him. In all honesty, he liked his women a little rough... like Maria. But he knew better than to get involved with them. They were like his mother, they would only take that soulful roughness and turn it on

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<sup>91</sup> Erika T. Wurth, *You Who Enter Here* (Albany: Excelsior Editions, 2019), 5.

<sup>92</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Wurth *You Who Enter Here*, 10.

you.”<sup>94</sup> Matthew, of course, does not take his own advice; he does get involved with Maria despite his concerns.

*“But they had to learn”*

Maria falls in and out of Wurth’s novel just as she falls in and out of Matthew and Chris’s life. On one hand, she is always present, whether this be through the borderline obsessive thoughts of Matthew, the worry of Chris hidden behind his hypermasculine violence, or in person as she enters and exits the world of “the 505s.” On the other hand, however, she is perpetually absent, whether this be because she is placed on the outskirts of the action due to her gender or the fact that she is always positioned as an extension of either Chris or Matthew, never as a human in and of herself. Furthermore, Maria’s addiction to H means she is literally disappearing from the narrative every time she begins slipping back into old habits.<sup>95</sup> While *You Who Enter Here* is written by a female author, the male-centric narration and environment of the novel affects how Maria is positioned as a character, and, because we too live in a male-centric environment, the depiction of Maria is an accurate representation of the deliberate decentering of women. However, Maria loses neither her voice nor her power until climax of the novel, when Matthew shoots her in his chaotic grief after Chris and Matthew find Maria hanging out with another member of “the 505s,” Math, who has betrayed Chris and has plans of incorporating into another, more powerful gang.<sup>96</sup>

Prior to Maria’s death at the hands of Matthew, Maria is simultaneously enacting her own agency within the almost entirely male world of “the 505s” and being repeatedly abused by her long-term boyfriend Chris. Even Matthew is confused by the dynamics of

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<sup>94</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 88.

<sup>95</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 184-87.



their relationship, noting, “well, Maria cheated on Chris. And Chris was always diffing her out of some shithole and cleaning her up. All of it was confusing. Often, at night, he had heard Chris crying. At first, he thought it was Maria, but Maria never cried.”<sup>97</sup> Significantly, Matthew questions the soft vulnerability of this moment after having a conversation with Chris, who tells him, “women don’t want to be treated good, they want to know they place. If you keep treating them like that, they’ll start seeing you as the bitch, and they’ll cheat, and start taking you for granted, and then they on to another man.”<sup>98</sup> We, much like Matthew himself, are instantly confronted with the seeming contradicting images—one in which Chris asserts his hypermasculine control over women, even going so far as to call the relationships between men and women “war,” and another in which Maria “would hold [Chris] and rock him and [tell him] that he could be her baby.”<sup>99</sup> Matthew’s confusion, then, stems from the gap between these two images of hypermasculinity on the outside and intense vulnerability caused by a childhood and generational history of abandonment on the inside.

Due to the point of view of *You Who Enter Here*, during the aforementioned scene there is no insight into Maria’s own feelings about the dynamics of her relationship with Chris. It is not until later, after Maria and Matthew begin sleeping with one another, that Maria counters Chris’s lecture on how women should be treated, and she does so with such succinctness that it is clear how much she knows about how Chris, and other men, see and talk about her. Maria tells Matthew, “At first it would work .... Him making me jealous. He’s not some kind of damn genius like he thinks he is. He’s just a bulldog. He knows how to pout, how to dig his paws in. But after a while, you realize he just an

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<sup>97</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 39.

<sup>98</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 38.

<sup>99</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 39.

animal. A selfish one .... He thought it would keep me ... But eventually it just made me realize that I'd never loved him."<sup>100</sup> Even if it is true, as Math later suggests, that Maria is performing her love for Matthew in hopes of getting Chris's attention, these words are powerful. They are not only proof that Maria is aware of Chris's attempted manipulation of her but also a lesson to Matthew, meant to undo the previous lessons he's learned from Chris. Hurting women, physically or emotionally, Maria tells him through her own story with Chris, won't make them love you.

Nevertheless, Maria's awareness of the problematic areas of her relationship does not save her from the abuse she endures. Just as Matthew's mother is abused repeatedly by the various men she brings into her home, Maria continually finds herself back with Chris, facing his wrath and sometimes even deliberately invoking it. Maria goes so far as to equate violent outbursts with proof of love, telling Matthew when she confronts him after their first time together sexually, "Go ahead, I know you want to. You want to hit me because you scared I'm right. And you want to hit me because you never got to punish mommy for all the shit she did to you. And you want to hit me because you love me, and it hurts."<sup>101</sup> Matthew even prescribes this routine onto Maria and Chris, thinking that she does not want him to interfere when Chris is hurting her, basing Maria and Chris's relationship cycle on the one he'd seen play out time and time again with his mother and her boyfriends.<sup>102</sup>

In this environment, the power that Maria does have at her disposal is her sexuality, her ability to know what the men around her want her to be, and she uses this to her advantage in all her relationships (with Chris, Matthew, and Math, specifically).

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<sup>100</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 131.

<sup>101</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 95.

<sup>102</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 123.

However, she is constantly policed and punished for doing so. Both Chris and Matthew are jealous anytime she gives her body or even her attention to another man, and when Maria points out the hypocrisy to Chris, who has himself cheated, he exclaims, “Because I’m your man! It’s different for me! You’re supposed to be loyal!”<sup>103</sup> Even Matthew, who is more forgiving and less violent towards Maria, is unable to contain his rage when he sees her with Math for the first time. He immediately takes out his violence on Math, and he lectures Maria on her lack of loyalty until she finally admits, “*Don’t you get it, Ishkeh?* I’m tired of being clean .... I just want him to leave me the *fuck alone* so that I can finally die.”<sup>104</sup> Even Math tells Matthew that he should give up on Maria, telling him that she is using him and is incapable of loving anyone, instead using everyone and everything at her disposal to feed her addiction to H.<sup>105</sup>

Notably, Math’s warning to Matthew that Maria will never be able to love him due to her loyalty to Chris and addiction to H does nothing to discourage Matthew from loving her, even if it does make him question whether or not he and her will be able to have a future together. In fact, these warnings only make it clearer to Matthew that he and Maria have experienced the same traumas, which allows them to understand one another.<sup>106</sup> Crucial to this understanding is their shared experiences with sexual abuse, which is the foundation not only of Matthew’s relationship with Maria but also with his girlfriend (and Maria’s best friend) Sharina.<sup>107</sup> In both cases, the first time Matthew sleeps with Sharina and Maria respectively it comes after admitting to having been sexually abused. Sharina admits that her uncle has sexually abused her after Matthew

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<sup>103</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 186.

<sup>104</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 91.

<sup>105</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 169-170.

<sup>106</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 171-72.

<sup>107</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 73, 92.

speaks of his own abuse at the hands of his mother's boyfriends, and this leads Matthew to start a relationship with her based on mutual understanding: "They did not love one another, and never would. But there was something almost better than love there—compassion, understanding. This Matthew decided, was enough."<sup>108</sup> Likewise, after finding Maria with Math and taking her home, Maria tells Matthew that Chris has told her about Matthew's past experiences, and she opens up herself, saying, "Men touched me too you know. My mother's boyfriends. She liked white guys."<sup>109</sup> These shared lived experiences allow Matthew to feel safe around these two women, and, in the case of Maria, the fact that both of them are addicted to a substance (alcohol and H respectively) adds to their understanding of one another.

Maria is rarely given the chance to define herself. Primarily she is defined by the men around her, all of whom place her somewhere in between the woman of their dreams and a whore with no morals. Chris, Maria's long-term, on-and-off again boyfriend. The connections that Matthew feels to Maria and Sharina are unlike the connection he feels to Chris, but they stem from the same fears of abandonment and re-experiencing of past traumas. Whereas Maria, in a less than subtle Oedipal manner, remind Matthew of his mother, Matthew sees in Chris the potential for a father, and, at the conclusion of the novel, Matthew even admits that Chris did, in fact, raise him, saying, "He'd been a shitty dad, but a dad nonetheless."<sup>110</sup> The acknowledgement of Chris's father-like role fits with the larger narrative that Matthew constructed wherein "the 505s" are his makeshift family and Maria is simultaneously love interest and mother. Still, even though the homosocial relationship between Chris and Matthew is very different from the heterosexual and

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<sup>108</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 73.

<sup>109</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 92.

<sup>110</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 227.

sexualized relationship between Matthew and Maria, the underlying emotions of love and hate are intimately tied to one another. Matthew, throughout the narrative, moves back and forth between not wanting to be like the men who hurt his mother and hating his mother, and thus other women, for not protecting him. Therefore, when the climax of the novel occurs, Matthew's killing of both Maria and Chris is a belated answer to Maria's demand that he hit her to "punish mommy," and although it is not necessarily a conscious choice, he is able to re-enact the violence enacted upon him by people who said they loved him onto others that he says he loves.

On the other hand, Matthew's exit from the 505s does not indicate, in his case, any particularly profound transformation for the better, at least not until the end of the narrative moments prior to Matthew's death.<sup>111</sup> Matthew's decision to leave the 505s is predicated upon Maria's insistence that she knows a cop who can get them out, and when he envisions a future, he can only imagine an overidealized domesticity with her by his side.<sup>112</sup> The fantasy of his exit from the 505s, however, vastly differs from the reality. Matthew is in love with Maria despite her long-term relationship with Chris, whom he identifies as a mixture of a father figure and older brother or mentor.<sup>113</sup> But Maria's unfaithfulness to Chris goes beyond her relationship with Matthew, as she has also recently cheated on Chris with the younger gang member nicknamed Math. It is this seeming infraction that causes suspicion to arise in Matthew about his potential future. Although never confirmed, Math reveals to Matthew that Maria is only with him to make Chris jealous and that there is no cop to help her and Matthew escape with their lives.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*.

<sup>112</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 126.

<sup>113</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*.

<sup>114</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 169-70.

These are the incidents that lead to Matthew's acts of violence against Maria and, thus, precipitates his leave from the 505s and gang participation overall.<sup>115</sup>

Matthew's seeming restraint and often-veiled empathy endears him to us, but it also threatens his masculinity among the 505 members, particularly Chris. As the novel progresses, Matthew's affection for Maria comes out in a need to physically protect her from Chris, who abuses her regularly. When he is finally unable to stop himself from intervening between Chris and Maria, Matthew's manhood is challenged. Matthew grabs Chris's fist before he can punch Maria, causing Chris to lash out at him: "Homes? Are you fucking kidding me homes? You ain't gonna let me take care of my fucking woman? What the fuck is wrong with you, Ishkeh?"<sup>116</sup> Matthew ends up letting go of Chris's fist and walking away as Chris goes through with his act of abuse. Matthew defends this decision by thinking, "Matthew resisted the urge to turn around and slam his own fist into Chris's face. He knew Maria didn't want that anyway, and he knew this was part of their routine."<sup>117</sup> This type of violence—that which is enacted upon girls and women and framed as appropriate reactions to female disobedience—is, as Mona Ruiz, a woman who grew up with connections to and as a member of the F-Troop gang, encouraged and, in many ways, demanded of male gang members.<sup>118</sup>

Much like Math, Maria's motivations, desires, and actions are filtered through the narration of Matthew, and Matthew's love for Maria stems from a misunderstanding of her as a continuation of his mother—or, more specifically, a vessel through which he can

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<sup>115</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 184-87.

<sup>116</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 122.

<sup>117</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 123.

<sup>118</sup> H. David Brumble, *Street-Gang and Tribal -Warrior Autobiographies* (London: Anthem Press, 2018), 103.

rewrite the tragic story of being abandoned by his mother.<sup>119</sup> Maria, then, is never acknowledged by Matthew in her individual character outside of himself or Chris. Matthew, himself, never hits Maria, but he does envision enacting violence on her and other women who remind him of his mother.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, when Chris enacts violence on Maria, Matthew, as shown, does little to nothing to help her own of the situation. Maria, then, lacks a voice in the narrative not only because Matthew is an unreliable narrator when it comes to Maria's thoughts and actions but also because Maria is a woman—or, more accurately, a girl—who is attempting to survive in a world that is openly hostile to her. Mona Ruiz's comments about her own experience, on the other hand, can provide insight into Maria's experience.

Mona Ruiz tells her story in H. David Brumble's book on autobiographies of gang members and how they are a modern version of the warrior autobiography. This is significant because, like Maria, Ruiz's voice is filtered through a male voice. Furthermore, unlike Maria, who is in physical danger and the power dynamic between Maria and both Matthew and Chris respectively is skewed because of this, the power dynamic between Brumble and Ruiz is not skewed by physical violence but, rather, institutional and societal disparities. While these inequalities in social and economic positioning should be considered, Ruiz's experiences, as someone who has willingly spoken up and as someone who is no longer involved in her respective gang, is reliable and can be assumed to be genuine. Ruiz's story begins with her spending time around cousins who are members of the F-Troop and slowly becoming an official member of the

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<sup>119</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*.

<sup>120</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*.

gang's all-female counterpart.<sup>121</sup> However, the focus of Brumble's chapter is Ruiz's relationship with a man in the F-Troop gang who abused Ruiz and whom Ruiz ran from.<sup>122</sup> Brumble suggests that the difference between the larger society of the United States and the societies developed within gangs is the mindset around the abuse of women. The NFL is used as the prime example, with Brumble explaining that, while domestic and partner abuse is prevalent in this realm, punishments are put forth due to the disgust and shame associated with physically abusing one's partner; however, Brumble states that, in gangs, the physical abuse of women is utilized as a tool to prove one's power and, thus, welcomed by the other male members and, in part, expected by the female members.<sup>123</sup>

Brumble, then, explains the thinly veiled line between the power of women in the background making political decisions through the men in their family or their husbands and their tenuous position and vulnerability in a world that allows for their physical injury at the hand of the men in their life.<sup>124</sup> Maria's survival is insistent upon traveling alongside this precipice where, on the one hand, she has some level of power over Chris, Math, and Matthew, but this power is only productive when it is subtle and even then, only minimally. Math is the only one who seems to recognize Maria's capacity to both survive and manipulate those around her in order to do so. Math explains to Matthew, "I'm guessing she ratted me out because she thought that ... shit, I don't know, she had something to gain. Like I said, she's not stupid. She plays everyone."<sup>125</sup> This small concession of Maria's intelligence, however, is overshadowed by Math's assurance that it

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<sup>121</sup> Brumble, 104-05.

<sup>122</sup> Brumble, 102.

<sup>123</sup> Brumble, 102.

<sup>124</sup> Brumble, 107-09.

<sup>125</sup> Wurth, *You Who Enter Here*, 169.



is he, not her, who is using the other effectively. Maria's eventual death at the hands of Matthew seems to confirm that she was never truly going to leave Chris and that there never was a police officer willing to take her and Matthew away. However, with Chris—who has been shown to be violent towards Maria on numerous occasions—threatening Maria, it can easily be assumed that she is attempting to save her own life. Because of this, readers cannot be sure of how Maria truly feels, they are left without the ability to adequately understand Maria's actions.

*You Who Enter Here*, which brings up questions of what it means to have everyone die in the end, of showing what happens to Indigenous people who dare to live in the city, to be modern. In other words, what does it mean for *You Who Enter Here* to be tragic? Waziyatawin writes about the loss of cultural practices, languages, and religions as proof that “the forces of colonialism were historically so brutal and effective that some of our people and traditions have not been able to survive them. Not because we are weak, not because we are inferior, but because the power of colonialism has been, in some instances, to devastating to overcome.”<sup>126</sup> This does not discredit the importance of Indigenous resistance and agency. However, as Waziyatawin and Wurth both show, Indigenous peoples “create spaces where our ways of being are practiced and nurtured, where we attempt to liberate ourselves from the oppression that surrounds our daily existence, where it is good to be Indigenous,” and, for Matthew and the other characters of *You Who Enter Here*, “the 505s” is a place where this goal was attempted, but, as Waziyatawin continues, “We make them last as long as we can, but because they, as of yet, cannot be sustained, we are forced to return to the ‘real world’ that smother with an oppressive weight not all of us can bear to carry.” This is what Wurth's conclusion points

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<sup>126</sup> Waziyatawin, 197.

to, the current lack of sustained ability to enact self-determination and agency. This is not to say that movements, communities, and organization with this goal in mind are not effective, because each push against the system is still making a dent, but, rather, it is to say that the fight is nowhere near over. In other words, we will have to continue to “demystify” the Indigenous experience, but we cannot do so without revealing the brutal and traumatic realities of this experience. All the stories must be told, even the ones that make us uncomfortable, even the ones that talk about why Indigenous youth would participate in violence, in sexism and the patriarchy, and in racism.

## CONCLUSION

### (RE)IMAGINING INDIGENOUS FUTURES

In 1973, in the landmark case between Charles Moritz and the Commissioner of Internal Revenue, which was argued before the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her husband (and fellow lawyer) Marty Ginsburg, along with the support of the ACLU, argued a tax case. This case became the basis for nearly all other gender discrimination cases to come, as the outcome provides evidence to how the caregiver tax, prior to this case, discriminated against men, refusing to allow never-married men to take advantage of the tax credit when taking care of an ailing parent.<sup>127</sup> As Judge Holloway—who presided over the court during this case—writes, “We conclude that the classification is an invidious discrimination and invalid under due process principles.”<sup>128</sup> This case, and those that follow, have been (rightly) lauded for their impact on gender equality and seen as victories on the part of feminist activists, particularly those working within the legal system to affect change. Still, these incremental changes are a major part of the reason why Native women have (also,

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<sup>127</sup> Wendy Webster Williams, “Symposium Presentation: Rutgers School of Law—Newark and the History of Women and the Law: Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s Rutgers Years: 1963-1972,” reported by 31 Women’s Rights L. Rep. 229 (2010), 13-15.

<sup>128</sup> United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, “Moritz v. Commissioner,” 22 Nov. 1972, 4.

rightly) felt excluded from the feminist agenda of the past and present. Despite legal wins for women (read: white women), most of these cases prioritize white, middle-class concerns while also not providing a reliable framework for the enforcement of these anti-discriminatory policies.

While this is not to imply that these legal forms of affecting change are ineffective, I will suggest that addressing sexism and gender discrimination solely within the legislative branch of a settler state inherently forces the conversation to focus on white, middle-class values. Further, this erases intratribal and intertribal gender discrimination, which, as Rauna Kuokkanen explains, causes “Indigenous women [to be] torn between the oppression they share with Indigenous men and the violence they experience at the hands of those same men.”<sup>129</sup> In other words, despite the current calls of Indigenous women to advocate for feminist progress centered around Indigenous experiences, Lucy Bigboca is right: “Native women don’t need [white] feminism ... that’s colonizing anyway.”<sup>130</sup> In this way, Lucy proves herself someone who understands the complications and dangers of claiming feminism, whether through her education; lived experiences; or both. Nevertheless, Lucy’s hesitance to claim feminism should not imply that feminism is not a productive pathway forward for Indigenous womxn. It is *white feminism* that lacks the substance to create change. Intersectional Indigenous Feminisms and Native feminist frameworks, on the other hand, have been shown to be effective in the fight against settler-colonial systems of oppression and violence.

A key similarity among Lucy, Candy, and Maria, is their isolation from other women. Even though each character has access to other women, the interaction between

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<sup>129</sup> Rauna Kuokkanen, “Politics of Gendered Violence in Indigenous Communities,” in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, edited by Joyce Green (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 105.

<sup>130</sup> Wurth, *Buckskin Cocaine*, 33.

female characters is sparse (I am not certain that either of the texts would pass the Bechdel test). The women, then, are left to only interact with the men who constantly belittle, dismiss, or enact physical violence on their bodies; furthermore, since these women are in environments where men dominate as figures of power, the characters are forced to conform if they wish to gain access to power and recognition. The women in *Buckskin Cocaine* and *You Who Enter Here* are in the same position that many (or most) womxn find themselves in daily, particularly BIPOC womxn. That being said, the message of solidarity alone simply leads to more *white feminist* behavior that replicates, rather than destroys, the settler-colonial heteropatriarchy. Solidarity alone changes little.

*Buckskin Cocaine*, and specifically Lucy Bigboca, opens the floor to have conversations about Indigenous women and their experiences in the world. In the wake of louder white feminist voices, Wurth decenters whiteness by depicting the complicated relationship between race and gender, particularly as it relates to how both white and Indigenous men enact violence against Indigenous women. This paper hopes to begin a deep investigation into how Indigenous women relate to white feminism, how they construct Indigenous feminisms, and how they survive in the settler patriarchy. These conversations will provide a foundation for future theories of how change can be affected by and for Indigenous women. As the research in this field continues, *Buckskin Cocaine* and *You Who Enter Here* by Wurth will be ripe spaces for these conversations, as the other female characters in literature are likewise ignored, abused, and questioning constantly about their authenticity. The characters of Lucy, Candy, and Maria, whom Wurth gives voice to, are representative of lived Indigenous female experiences wherein feminist activism is not a rhetorical theory but key to survival and important for the

visibility of violence against women and girls. The plethora of characters that Wurth provides gives us a way to talk about the violent and traumatic realities of our contemporary situation without imagining that this is a norm that will inevitably continue.

My Instagram no longer has the hashtags #intersectionalfeminism and #empoweredwomenempowerwomen. Though I still believe in these concepts, I have replaced these hashtags with a quote from a text I read for this thesis: “At its core, Indigenous Feminisms is about cultural preservation and Indigenous sovereignty.”<sup>131</sup> This is still problematic; the bio-friendly quote cannot adequately delve into the nuanced term Indigenous Feminisms, and I still don’t explain in depth my commitment to these concepts. However, it is a start--in the same way that Candy’s recognition of the emptiness of her life is; the same way that Lucy’s insistence that she has agency and should be taken seriously is; the same way that Maria’s attempt to gain control of her own life despite the violence around her is. The point of Indigenous Feminist frameworks is to fight back against settler-colonialism in ways that amplify Native womxn voices, as explained beautifully in a statement made by Leah Daughtry on the podcast *Brown Girls Guide to Politics*, “If you can’t get in the room, I failed...”<sup>132</sup>

As a white, settler scholar, I write this thesis and hope to write all things with this in mind. It is not only about getting a diverse group of individuals in the room but also about making that room safe for people. It is about no longer demanding that BIPOC womxn be the only ones doing the emotional labor of dismantling systems of oppression

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<sup>131</sup> Menoukha Robin Case and Allison V. Craig, *Introduction to Feminist Thought and Action: #WTF and How Did We Get here? #WhosThatFeminist #WhatsThatFeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 62.

<sup>132</sup> Leah Daughtry, “The Colored Girls: ‘Know Your Own Power,’” *The Brown Girls Guide to Politics*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.thebggguide.com/the-bgg-podcast/episode/35216ea6/the-colored-girls-know-your-own-power>.

but also doing our best to center their voices over our own, even at the detriment to our own careers. It is about admitting that we will make mistakes. It is about moving the conversation away from “how do we get Indigenous womxn to write more/better,” because they are writing. It is about listening.

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